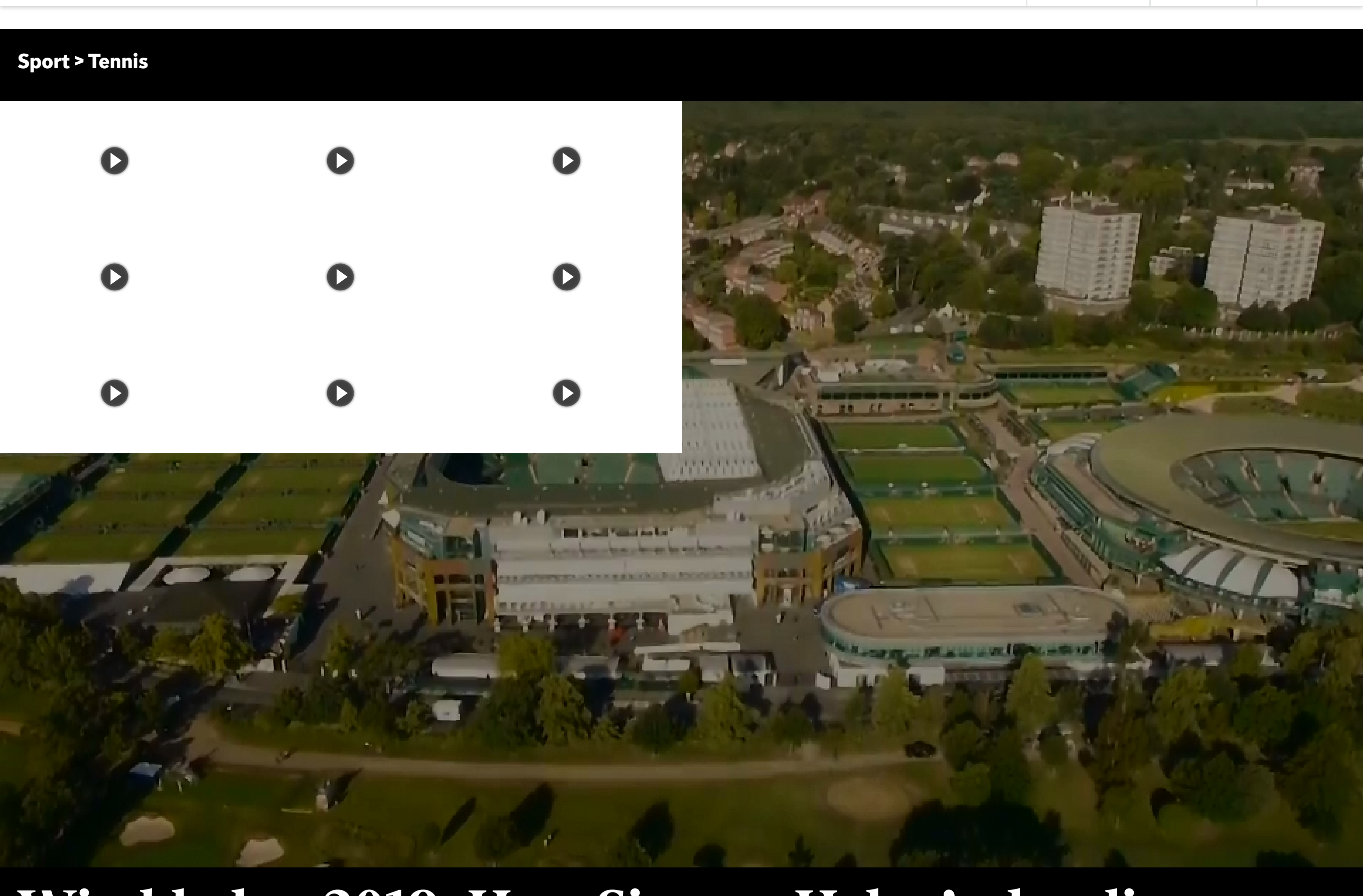

Wimbledon 2019: How Simona Halep's dazzling game plan got the better of Serena Williams

Against a player she had beaten nine times in their previous 10 meetings, Williams was expected to once again sweep aside her younger rival. But it never clicked for the 23-time Grand Slam winner. Halep was simply too good

Samuel Lovett | @samueljlovett | 15 hours ago |

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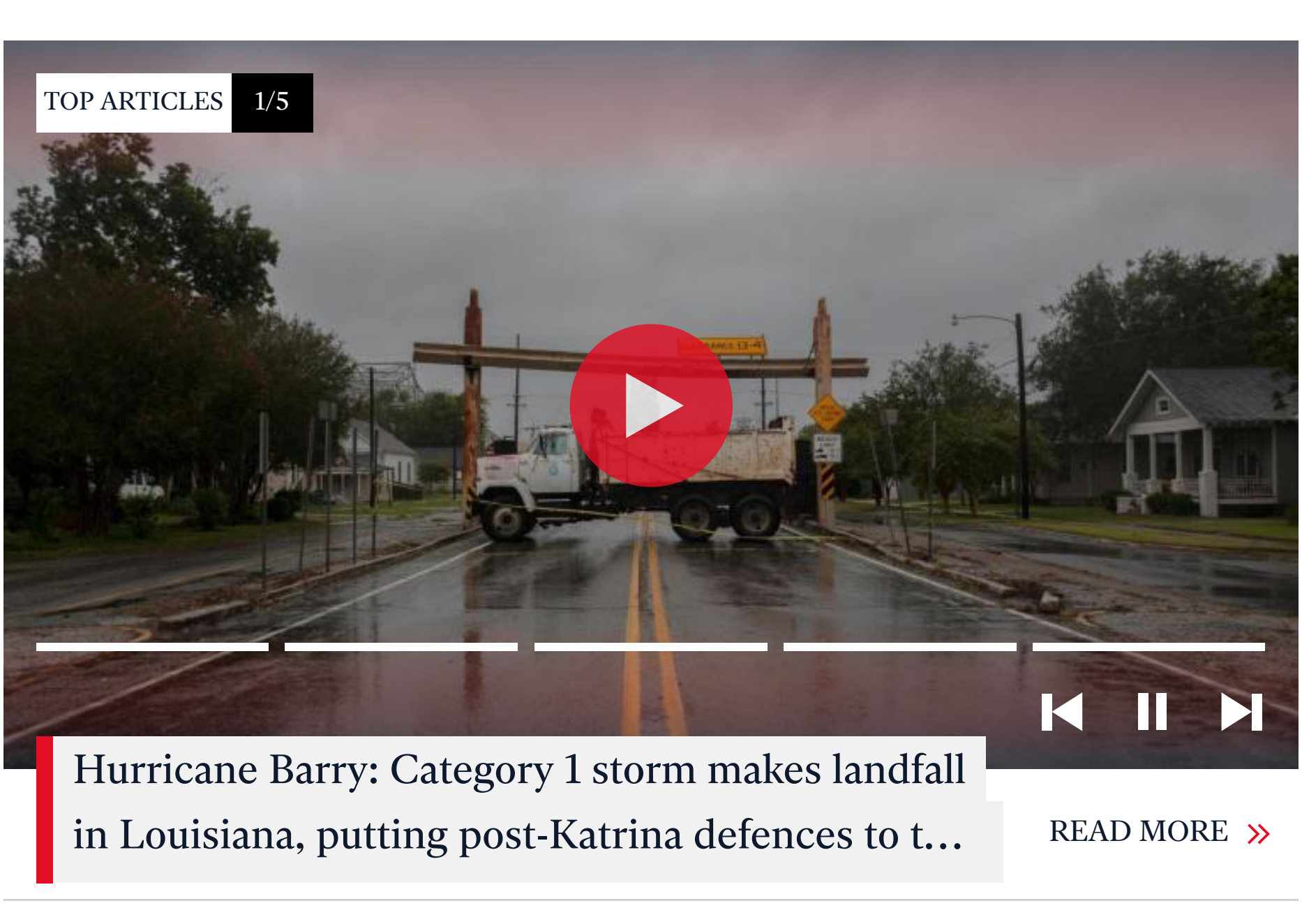
This was not the final anyone expected. The greatest player there has ever been, Serena Williams was firmly tipped to claim an eighth Wimbledon title today – and in doing so, secure a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam. But the Williams that had excelled in the second half of these Championships was absent.

Against a buoyant, confident and utterly composed Simona Halep – whose gameplay was executed to perfection – the 37-year-old fell painfully short. Defeat was swift. There was just 56 minutes on the clock as the Romanian sunk to her knees, her arms raised to the sky, a Wimbledon champion for the first time after a stunning display of tennis which blew Williams off the court.

"She literally played out of her mind," the American conceded afterwards. "I was a little bit like a deer in the headlights. When a player plays that amazing then you have to take your hat off and say well done."



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There was no denying that this was Halep's victory, not Williams' defeat. Whereas the word No 11 had looked sheepish and unsure of herself, the Romanian was calmness personified. Her shot-making was perfect, her returns the sharpest they've ever looked, her focus razor-sharp.

The first break was immediate. The second just as quick, a sweeping backhand winner punishing Williams' usually impenetrable serve. After just 11 eleven minutes, Halep led the first set 4-0. Centre Court was stunned.

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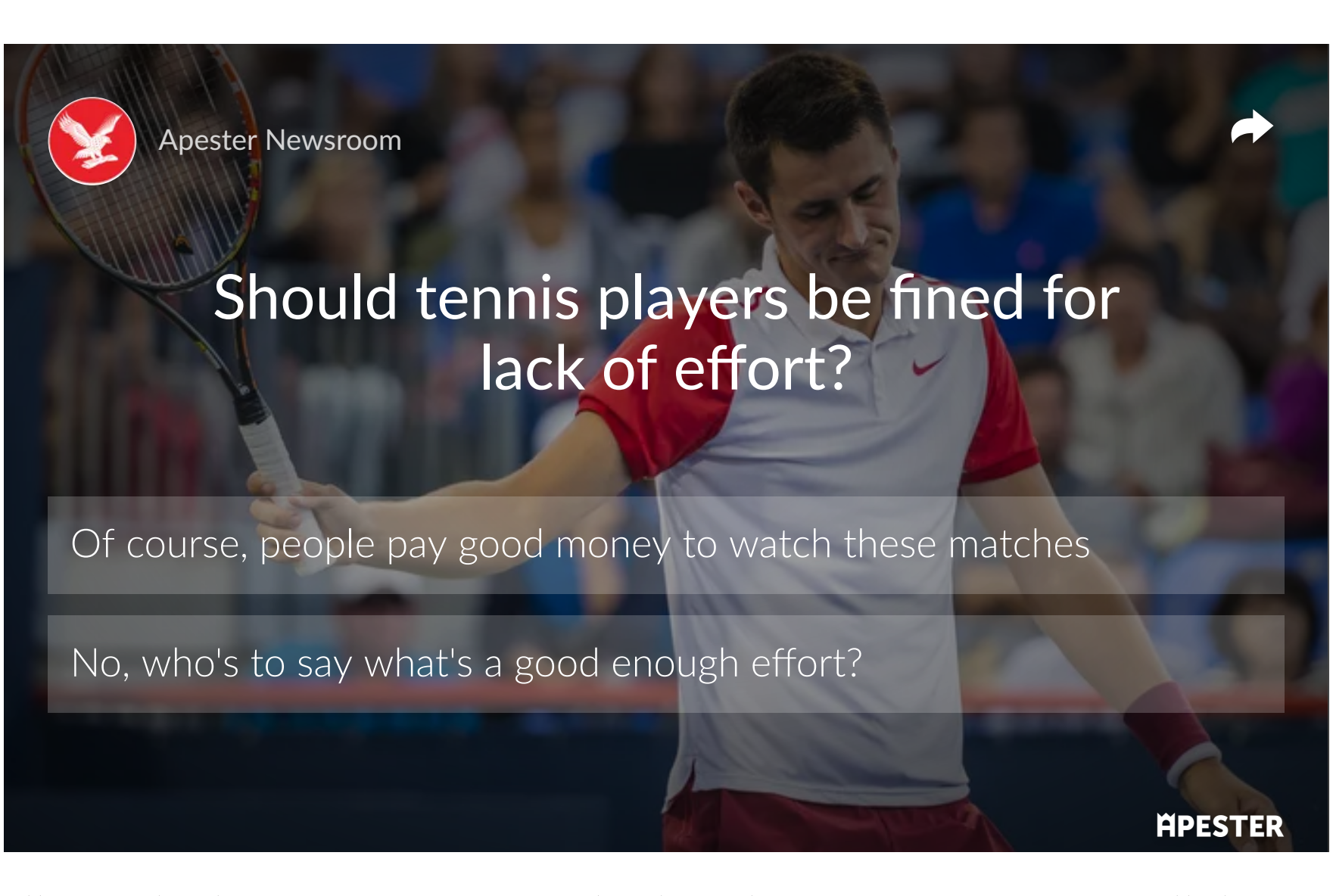
As the second set quickly rattled by – Halep clinching two more breaks with ease – it became apparent that Williams had no answers for the questions asked by her opponent. The American's game revolves around her sweeping baseline shots but Halep denied her the opportunity to make the most of these talents. The Romanian's strokes forced Williams back and forth across the court, preventing her from settling her feet to make those killer shots. She looked rushed, short of fitness, unsettled by the fact her rival was returning so many balls.



Should tennis players be fined for lack of effort?

- Of course, people pay good money to watch these matches
- No, who's to say what's a good enough effort?

Williams' high error count must also be taken into account. For all the brilliance of the Romanian, the world No 10's inconsistency only served to hinder her cause. She made 25 unforced errors in total, compared to Halep's three.

The 37-year-old had notably spoken before the match of the need to find the balance between aggression and serenity. "I definitely feel like I play better when I'm calm," Williams said earlier this week. "But it's definitely an effort. Not getting over-pumped but at the same time not getting under-wound. I have to be in that right space."

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To her detriment, the American never found that happy medium. When presented with those rare opportunities to punish Halep, she was too eager in her attempts, fearful perhaps that the world No 7 would be able to make the return if her strokes weren't powerful enough.

Indeed, the curled forehand whip which has reaped such rich rewards over the past two weeks was littered with mistakes. Repeatedly she crashed her shots into the net or sent them wide. It was a strange sight for those who have seen Williams dominate down the years here at the All England Club.

Since returning to the sport in March 2018 after the birth of her daughter, Olympia, it's been a hard, long journey back for Williams. She's faced numerous obstacles along the way, some of which have proved insurmountable.

In last year's Wimbledon final, against Angelique Kerber, her lack of fitness and mobility saw her struggle to keep pace with the German's consistent hitting. "I just remember I was tired and Angie played unbelievable," she said this week. "There was nothing I could do in that match. I did everything I could. Physically I just wasn't there."

In New York, confronted with the youthful vibrancy and confidence of Naomi Osaka, an explosion in emotions saw the wheels come off as she fell in straight sets to the Japanese. That defeat posed the question: would Williams ever land that historic 24th major title?

Today's final was meant to be that crowning moment. Against a player she had beaten nine times in their previous 10 meetings, Williams was expected to once again sweep aside her younger rival. But it never clicked for the 23-time Grand Slam winner. Halep was simply too good.

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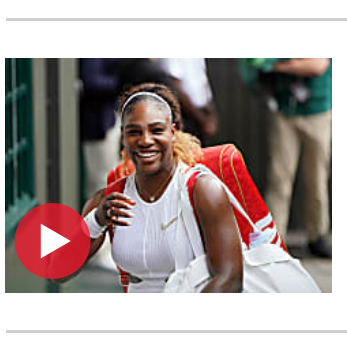

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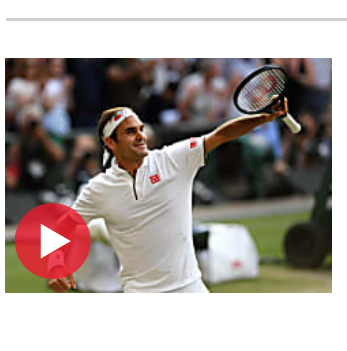

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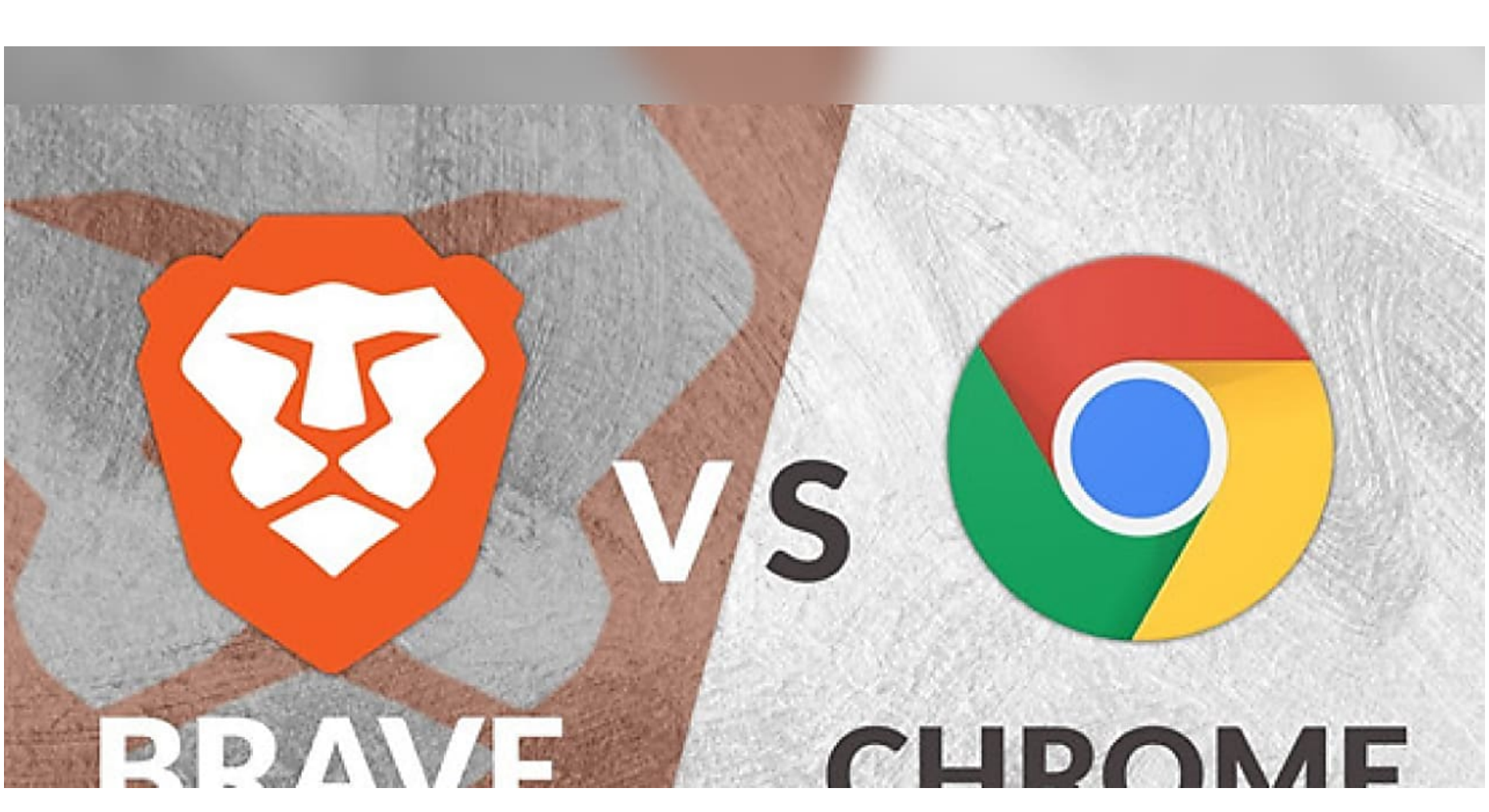

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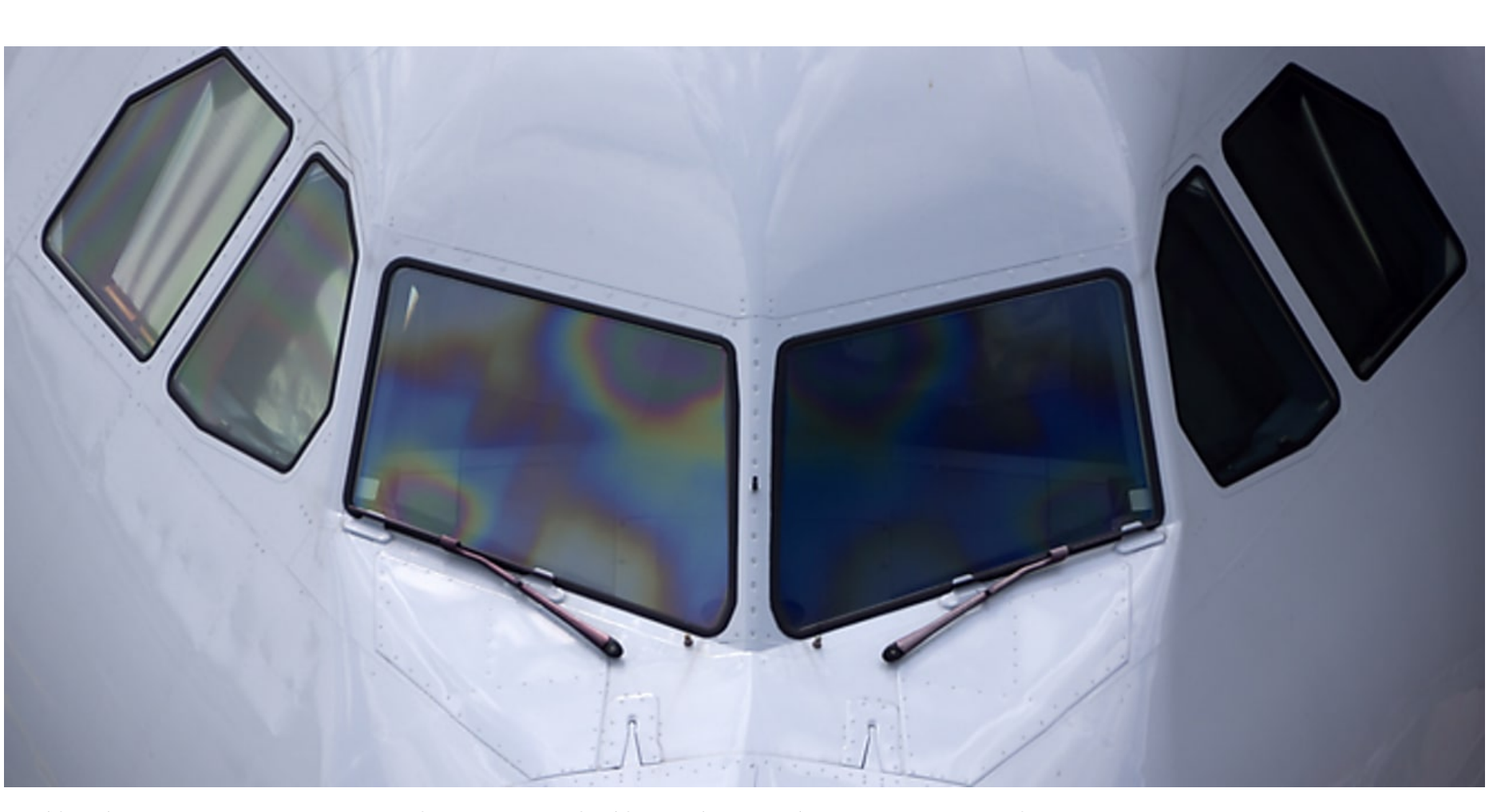

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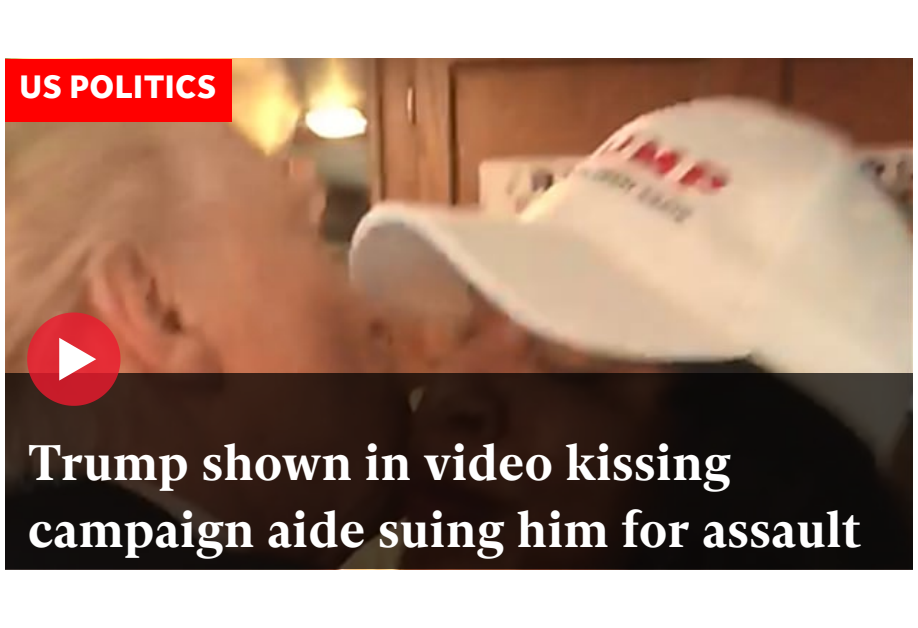

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